

CHAPTER EIGHT

INSTEAD OF REPLYING to Emir's warning, Kilbane went into action but kept his minisec active. He immediately placed his pill bottle back into his pocket, spun around, and dashed for the front door. The sniper rifle would be virtually useless in close-quarters combat so he left it. He wore fake fingerprints so it didn't matter since it couldn't be traced to anyone.

Kilbane steadied his breathing patterns to better modulate his adrenaline and put an ear up to his suite's front door. He heard several sets of feet running down the hallway toward the suite. They were too heavy to be tourists.

He reached down and grabbed his pistol from the ankle holster strapped there. He figured that the paramilitary force that Emir warned him about was most likely Istanbul's Anti-Terrorism Department Force. A couple of Kilbane's colleagues had encounters with them in the past and reported that they were a highly trained action team that wasted little time getting results for their superiors.

A single pistol against a well-armed squad like that wouldn't end well for Kilbane, but it was all that the mission had allowed for. Blackshift Primes didn't exist to the public. Indeed, the missions themselves didn't even exist—if a Prime was compromised during the course of a blackshift, they could expect to die.

Since Primes didn't officially have a background or citizenship, they'd be chalked up as nameless entities with no records on file. The world's governments would never admit that such unknown quantities would be running around in their countries and performing various dastardly deeds. Even if they considered public mention of such a thing, there would only be the nameless corpses of untraceable ghosts to blame things on.

Kilbane was ready to die. He'd been prepared for it to happen at any turn in his line of work.

The boots ran right by the door. Kilbane breathed a sigh of relief. *They must know my general location but not the specifics*—he thought to himself.

When the heavy footfalls had sufficiently subsided, Kilbane quietly opened the door and slid out into the hallway with his sidearm partially concealed at his side. Just then, he saw his FACID's holographic projection blink a few times and then fizzle out. Something had happened to the device—whether it was a malfunction or the batteries being used up too quickly—he didn't care. The jig was up. Now his real face was exposed.

Kilbane looked left and right down the long purple and gold hallway, trying to remember the place's layout.

"Kilbane, you there?" Emir asked through his minisec.

"Where's the exit to the rooftop?" Kilbane urgently queried. Spittle flew from his lips.

“Go down the hallway to your left. Take a right, go down forty feet, large door with a sign on right! Shouldn’t be guarded.”

Kilbane quickly walked down the hallway in the direction he was advised. He rounded the corner of the hall and stood there. In front of the doorway that led to the hotel’s rooftop stood a hotel guard. In a split second, Kilbane weighed his options.

He casually strolled down the hallway with a wide grin on his face. He counted on his deep tan to work in favor of his plan. The rest of the distance to the door consisted of Kilbane turning his head to look behind him and pointing in that direction.

“Get over there and see what that man’s doing!” he said in his best, officious-sounding Turkish while trying to hide his face.

“Did you find it?” Emir asked in his ear. Kilbane ignored him.

There was a slight pause and Kilbane wondered if the guard in front of him, a twenty-something Turkish young man of medium build, was buying his act. Luckily, the guard was one of the overly obedient types. Kilbane, still hiding his face as he got closer, could hear the man’s shoes pivot and run past him.

“Yes sir!” the guard said as he passed.

Kilbane’s high-class garments, along with his haughty tone, had convinced the guard that there might be a favorable report in his future because of his non-questioning attitude and quick-acting response time.

When the clueless guard disappeared around the hallway corner, Kilbane quickly approached the rooftop access doors. He pushed through the double doors.

As he passed through into a small room, he saw that it had both a single elevator as well as a stairway off to the left. He opted for the stairs leading upward and began climbing them.

After ascending a few flights of stairs, he ran into a hotel worker who was moving down the stairs in the opposite direction. He looked to be a little smaller than Kilbane but would have to do.

“Sir, do you need any assis—“

The man’s gracious offering was cut short by Kilbane’s hand chopping into his larynx. An elbow to the back of the head followed that up, rendering the worker unconscious. *Avoid killing innocents*—he reminded himself of his personal credo.

He quickly heaved the man over one shoulder and scurried back down the stairs as fast as his feet would carry him. He’d remembered a darkened area underneath the bottom of the stairwell that would be hard to notice from the rooftop access doors he’d come through.

Kilbane sat the man down behind some storage containers under the stairwell. After quickly disrobing, he replaced his clothes with the hotel workers’ own. He heard the rooftop access doors open and close several times and various footfalls on the stairs overhead, but no one came back to inspect his location.

After he stuffed his Al-Marri outfit into one of the containers, he quickly emerged from his clandestine spot when it was safe to. Again, he strode the stairs and this time made it to the top. There, he found another set of double doors. The sign above it: *ROOFTOP ACCESS 2*. He opened one and gusts of wind blew in his face as he walked out onto the hotel’s rooftop.

There were numerous airships situated across the expansive space, mainly aerocabs and larger commercial shuttles—all equipped with vertical take-off and landing (VTOL) technology. Hotel workers were everywhere. Some were helping hotel guests arrive as they disembarked from airships. Others scurried about, carrying various forms and sizes of luggage.

Maintenance employees likewise tended to the multitude of airships—making sure that they were in proper working order and refueling them as well.

“Hey, you!” A gruff voice sounded off to Kilbane’s right side.

He glanced over and saw a cadre of three paramilitary men carrying assault rifles. Their patches indicated that they were indeed a detachment of Istanbul’s Anti-Terrorism Department Force that Emir had warned about.

“Yessir?” Kilbane raised his voice a couple of octaves in order to sound meek. Trying to sound like the officious Al-Marri wouldn’t work here.

“Did you see anything strange downstairs? Anyone running around?” One of them asked.

“No sir!”

The man asking Kilbane wore Sergeant’s stripes, which indicated that he was a squad leader. He looked at Kilbane briefly and then made a curt hand signal that directed him to continue moving.

Kilbane enacted his most feeble gait and scampered off like some de-balled cur.

He matched the quick walking and jogging patterns of the various hotel employees around him to blend in as best he could. He also wanted to get as far away from the anti-terrorism team as he could.

Once he reached the opposite side of the rooftop, almost tripping over some protruding maintenance cables in the process, he scanned his immediate vicinity. A family was just disembarking from a mid-sized shuttle. *Too risky and a couple of children are present*—he concluded.

He looked at the only other airship in the area. It was an aerocab. The vessel itself was pretty well maintained, but the scruffy pilot who was sitting in its cockpit looked as though he'd seen better days.

Kilbane jogged up to the aerocab and knocked on one of its cockpit windows, which jolted the man awake. The ship was about forty feet long, about average-sized for an aerocab. Its bulky fuselage reminded Kilbane of a baby beluga whale, like most aerocabs, and its cockpit was also housed to its fore.

The pilot made an angry face.

“Can I tell you something? Something’s wrong with your ship!” Kilbane said. Since the cockpit’s glass was thick he pointed to the passenger cabin area of the aerocab and affected a wide-eyed expression of urgency.

The pilot seemed to adjust to being awake and looked back to where Kilbane was pointing. The pilot, in turn, pointed back to where Kilbane was and arched his eyebrows in concern.

Kilbane dared a glance over his shoulder and saw a pair of anti-terrorism troopers walking in his direction. They were scanning the area and held their assault rifles at the ready.

Kilbane upped the vigor of his hand pointing. That seemed to do the job. The pilot finally dislodged himself from his pilot’s seat and began walking back into the aerocab’s cabin.

Kilbane walked back to the mid-portion of the shuttle and waited since that portion of the vessel had windows too

high for Kilbane to see into. A few moments that seemed like an eternity passed. A hissing sound emanated from the aerocab's side passenger door as it slid open horizontally. He looked back again. The troopers were closer than ever, probably forty or so feet, Kilbane guessed. They hadn't seemed to notice him yet.

As the aerocab's boarding stairs flipped down to the ground, Kilbane scampered up them so quickly that he almost bumped into the groggy pilot, a scrawny-looking middle-aged Turk who smelled like cheap booze.

"What the fu—"

Before the grungy-looking pilot could do anything, Kilbane had already turned and activated the automatic passenger door's closing mechanism. Just as the door began to swing shut, Kilbane reached around the backside of the man's neck with one hand and snapped his head downward. As he did that, he brought his knee up and struck the pilot in his solar plexus, stunning him. That, in turn, was followed up with a forearm to the temple which rendered the pilot unconscious.

He sat the man in one of the cabin's passenger seats and tied its seatbelt tightly around his captive's arms. He didn't want any interference, especially while in flight. From the passenger cabin, he dashed to the pilot's cockpit and deposited himself into the stinky seat located there. A couple of liquor bottles rattled around underfoot.

As Kilbane initiated the aerocab's take-off protocols, he looked to where the anti-terrorism troopers had been. He didn't see them so figured they'd doubled back.

Tap! Tap! Kilbane looked to the opposite side of the pilot's cabin window, which looked out over the edge of the hotel's rooftop, and saw one of the troopers right below the window of the cabin. The trooper had just tapped the

window with the butt of his assault rifle. Then he turned his rifle back around and pointed the barrel of it at Kilbane while yelling something at him. Kilbane couldn't hear him because of the rising sounds of the aerocab's VTOL engines and the thickness of its windows. Kilbane didn't need to be a lip-reader to know that the trooper wanted him to disembark for an inspection.

Kilbane smiled and put his hands up, indicating that he was going to move to the rear of the cockpit. He rose from the pilot's seat and began walking back into the aerocab's passenger cabin. He was careful to keep the trooper in his peripheral vision to make sure the man was moving with him.

His ruse seemed to work, he could see the dark shape of the man's uniform moving with him and away from the cockpit.

He waited for a few beats and then dashed back into the pilot's cabin. He didn't see any of the troopers but guessed they were waiting outside the passenger door for him to emerge. Kilbane planted himself into the pilot's chair and pushed the vessel's VTOL thrusters up to maximum capacity.

"Come on you mother!" Kilbane yelled out as he gripped the aerocab's control handles. After a slight delay, it jolted off of the ground with such force that it snapped Kilbane's head back. His heart felt as though it was being sucked down through his guts. He hurriedly set the VTOL flight controls to hover. Screams could be heard outside.

Looking out of the window and downward, he saw that he was approximately forty or so feet above the ground. He saw four troopers there that had been blown back by the sudden VTOL takeoff. Two lie stunned while another was struggling to hold onto his comrade who had almost been blown off the side of the rooftop.

Kilbane paused with his fingers above the rear thrusters. He didn't want the trooper to die. After all, the man was just performing his duties just as any loyal soldier would. The man holding him began to pull his jettisoned squadmate to safety. Just then, Kilbane heard bullets begin to strike the aerocab. He'd been so concentrated on the rescue operation that he hadn't noticed that the other troopers had recovered enough to fire up at him. They seemed to be aiming at the rear of the aerocab where the main thrusters were housed.

Hitting the rear thrusters, Kilbane braced himself in the pilot's chair. It lurched forward and this time it felt as though Kilbane's heart was deposited upon his spine. His head snapped back again and he could hear bullets hitting the rear of the aerocab.

Suddenly there was a hissing sound as well as a loud alert on the pilot's main control panel. One of the two main rear thrusters, as well as the vessel's main stabilization device, had been struck by rounds.

As the aerocab approached the edge of the rooftop it began to dip and rise sporadically, forcing Kilbane to try to compensate with the pilot's control handles. He pulled back on the handles for elevation when the vehicle dipped and pushed forward on them when it rose. But his efforts were negligible.

As his heart raced with adrenaline, Kilbane and the aerocab careened over the edge of the hotel's rooftop and into the open air. Despite his best efforts to pull back on the control handles, the aerocab's nose immediately dipped downward. In moments it was pointed directly at the ground and its fuselage was only about fifteen or so feet from the side of the hotel.